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ABSTRACT

An introductory course assignment for writing in English as a second language consists of four steps: (1) in a survey, students assess their own writing skills in both their native language and English; (2) each student interviews two people, one who writes frequently in the student's native language and one who writes frequently in English, about their writing habits and processes, and summarizes the findings; (3) each student writes a composition in his or her native language on an assigned topic, and the work is distributed so the class can compare writing systems and languages; and (4) each student presents the composition orally by paraphrasing, not translating. Class discussion covering the topic, organization, and role of the language used follows. The attention given to existing native language writing skills builds confidence and de-emphasizes the writing process, with which many students from traditional school systems are uncomfortable. It also helps the students get to know each other. (MSE)

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L1 WRITING FOR ESOL COMPOSITION

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In recent years, a small but growing body of research has begun to demonstrate a relationship between first and second language writing other than the relationship of interference presupposed by the contrastive rhetoric hypothesis. For example, Edelsky (1982:214) finds that second language writers "apply" first language writing skills to the writing of the second language, and a moderately positive correspondence has been shown between first and second language writing ability (see, for example, Hottel-Burkhart [1982], Leung [1984], and Cook [1985]). Little has been done, however, to apply these findings to the classroom, despite the fact that ESOL students (who, as Raimes [1979:3] points out, are not only resistant to classroom writing in general, like composition students who are native speakers of English, but are resistant to the English language itself) could use the L1 composition skills they already possess as a bridge to English composition. The purpose of this paper is to present an introductory writing assignment designed to encourage students to do this.

1. The Survey

In preparation for the writing assignment, students first fill out survey forms to answer some questions on their writing practices; the purpose is to get them to begin to think of themselves as writers in two languages. The surveys should be anonymous, so students will reply honestly, and before they are filled out the instructor should go over the questions with the students orally in order to insure comprehension. A sample set of questions used, with one student's replies, is as follows:

1. What strong points does your writing have, in your opinion?
   English writing: None
   Native language writing: wide vocebulery, good knowledge of gramme, feeling of language

2. What weak points does your writing have, in your opinion?
   English writing: small vocebulery, little knowlege of English gramme
   Native language writing: Long way to get the point.
3. Do you think you succeed in getting across everything you intend to say when you write?
   English writing: } not always
   Native language writing: }
4. Do you use a dictionary while you are writing?
   English writing: Yes, very often
   Native language writing: very seldom
5. Do you think about grammar when you write?
   English writing: Yes
   Native language writing: No
6. Do you take some brief notes before starting to write?
   English writing: } Sometimes I'm taking brief notes
   Native language writing: }
7. While you are writing, do you think about the reader who is going to be reading your writing?
   English writing: } always
   Native language writing: }

These are typical replies, and they reveal a difference in degree of confidence in the strength of first versus second language written expression and in linguistic security, with students generally saying that their written English, as opposed to their native language writing, has absolutely no strong points (Question 1), and that dictionary use and thinking about grammar are necessary only for writing in English and never for writing in the native language (Questions 3 and 4). Especially in Question 2, students rarely look beyond grammar, spelling, vocabulary, and punctuation in discussing their English writing; it's only in native language writing that students typically mention content, organization, and style. However,

similarities between first and second language writing strategies are also revealed, and in subsequent class discussion these similarities should be emphasized. For example, the students usually report that regardless of the language they are writing in, they do engage in some prewriting activity and give a little attention to audience (Questions 6 and 7).

2. The Interview

The next step is to have students look beyond themselves to the writing of others, with each student interviewing two people, one who writes frequently in the student's native language and one who writes frequently in English, in an exercise adapted from Harris (1984:1-3); responses are presented and compared by each student in the form of a 200 to 250-word summary. Answers to questions about steps followed, the importance of revision, and other aspects of writing not surprisingly show individual differences of habit and opinion, but also overall similarities; in general, the writers interviewed by students, regardless of native language, have said rather similar things, and given useful advice:

> My sister in law she is from this country [the U.S.] writes twenty minutes a day. But unlike my brother [a native speaker of Farsi] she writes memos and other things for her office. She takes the same steps as my brothers.
>
> --Mahmood P.
>
> She [a native speaker of Italian] concludes with a smart glance that is better a short succulent writing than a long notionless one without any sense. Miss Lynch [a native speaker of English] agrees.
>
> --Paola G.

In class, reports of comments such as these provide an excellent springboard for discussion of the writing process,

including the steps followed and the importance of revision, as students discuss why these writers do what they say they do.

3. The Composition

With this preparation, each student is then asked to write a composition in his or her native language on an assigned topic. After the compositions are collected, they are duplicated and distributed to the class. The students usually want to spend the first few minutes after they receive their composition packets on what might be called "language appreciation" activities, satisfying their curiosity about the different alphabets and writing systems. Some students, for example, have never really seen Chinese writing before, and want to know how it works, and perhaps how to write a few characters, while others have never seen different alphabets, like the Cyrillic, before, and wish to examine the letters used. It's useful for them to see that even though writing systems may look different, they accomplish the same purpose, and the brief examination of the different writing systems presented can then serve as a basis for the discussion of general differences between written and spoken text.

4. The Oral Presentation

Students then present their compositions to the class orally. Cultural "show-and tell" is a familiar tradition in ESOL classes, and it is here extended to the writing class, as students are given a set of questions to use as a guide and asked to explain their compositions to the class. The use of guided questions is important, since without them students may misunderstand what is wanted and simply try to translate their compositions literally into English. Since the focus of the exercise is the writing process, students are not permitted to translate beyond an occasional phrase that a student author may be especially pleased with; instead, students tell the class about their compositions by paraphrasing and discussing. The following set of sample questions will be familiar in type

to anyone who has used the conference approach to teaching composition (see, for example, Dawe and Dornan [1984]).

1. In what language was the paper written?
2. The topic of the paper was why you decided to come to Central. What reasons did you give? How did you decide what to include in the paper? Is there anything you were originally going to include, but decided later to leave out? Why?

   SAMPLE ANSWER: The paper is written in German, and--the reasons I gave was that--uh--the main reason is that it's an exchange program from my--uh--home university in Kassel, in Germany...and another reason I wrote is that--I think that--um --the American culture had, because of-- the policy after the war, has a lot of influence on--German culture.

   --Werner H.

3. Did you find any part of the paper especially difficult to write? What was so difficult about it? How did you solve the problem?

   SAMPLE ANSWER: The part that gave me trouble is-- um--the last one, because I don't know how to finish my paper!

   --Nhan V.

4. In what order did you arrange the reasons you gave in the paper? Why did you decide to arrange them that way? Is there any relationship between the way you arranged the reasons and the way you divided the paper into paragraphs?

   SAMPLE ANSWER: I arranged--uh--I arranged my composition from least to most important, because I thought it would be better to initiate the composition with basic things, and--the--write about the main things later on.

   --Chris B.

5. How did you conclude the paper?

   SAMPLE ANSWER: In conclusion I wrote--I summarized all the points that I mentioned about, that made me--uh,...that I choose this college because of the reasons mentioned above, and I think that I did the right choice.

   --Haydee I.

6. Do you think this paper would be different if you had written in English instead? How would it be different?

7. Now that you've had a chance to look at your paper again, is there anything you would change if you rewrote it?

   SAMPLE ANSWER: I'm not gonna write it again. It's the best thing that I ever have written. Maybe it's not perfect, but I think that it's all done. I read it again, like after I wrote it I read it again; I did everything; I corrected some mistakes or some things, but I think that--the Portuguese is very good, I mean at least better than the English [would be] --much better--I have too many problems with that.

   --Margery F.

After each oral presentation, the rest of the class has an opportunity to ask questions and offer suggestions, and this is a good preparation for later small-group work where they will listen to or read each others' English compositions and comment on them. The teacher's role during the question period is basically to use students' comments to further draw their attention to various aspects of the writing process and to characteristics of good writing.

When two or more students write essays in the same language, they can be invited to evaluate and compare their compositions for the class. This is not as threatening an activity as it

would be if they were writing in English for a grade, and it often leads to additional insights and sometimes to interesting debates as students inspect each other's writing minutely for signs of incipient language loss and argue about what is appropriate in their native language writing. In one class, for example, a Polish composition with what other Polish speakers considered a confusing, unfocused introduction led to a lively discussion on the propriety of such introductions in both Polish and English.

In addition to the benefits already outlined, the assignment described has two advantages for students. First, while at some institutions ESOL students are able to satisfy requirements for a course in English composition by completing the ESOL composition course in which they are enrolled--effectively "sheltered composition"--at other institutions students are required to take subsequently the regular freshman English course given to all undergraduates. Students faced with the latter prospect often express considerable uncertainty about their ability to measure up to the standards they expect their native English-speaking fellow students to set. Of course, they are wildly overestimating the writing ability of the average English-speaking college student, but the fact remains that to them, the university English composition class represents something new and formidable for which they feel totally unprepared by previous experience and instruction. Attention to L1 composition can show students what they know about writing and may be doing well already, when they first enter the English composition class, and so can help build their confidence.

A second advantage involves the fact that ESOL students coming from traditional educational systems often express discomfort with the emphasis on process in the modern writing class. To such students, composition is the finished product, and they expect to receive little from the instructor besides careful instruction in grammar and thorough error correction. When these are not forthcoming, they feel confused and dis-

satisfied, and sometimes drop the course (it is ironic that while on the one hand they feel that they know nothing about writing in English, and fear the English composition class, on the other hand they feel in effect that they already know everything about composition in English, and only require more instruction in grammar to be just fine). Since students may not take the same narrow view of L1 writing, and recognize that more than grammar is required there, attention to similarities between L1 writing and writing in English can hopefully encourage them to see that there is more to English writing, too, than mere grammatical and technical correctness.

By the conclusion of the activity (which normally takes three fifty-minute classes scattered over two or three weeks) the students have learned something about each other, something about writing in general, and something about English composition--especially that it's not uniquely difficult just because it is English, and that if they can compose and write successfully in their native language, they can learn to do it in English, too.

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